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Elizabeth Jennings: Voicing Religious Faith through Poetry

In his essay "Poetry human and divine", deriving from his earlier book *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Sir Michael Edwards reflects on the mysterious link between the eternal Word of God and human words which make poems. In the opening section of his article he refers to far-reaching implications of the description of the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis, and draws attention to the fact, often overlooked by the readers, namely that "God speaks the world into being. He does not make, build, paint, sing or dance it: he *says* it" (Edwards 2017: 19). Similarly, he stresses the significance of language in the communication between Divinity and humanity in the scene from the Book of Exodus when God gives to Moses the stone tablets with commandments "written with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:18). Edwards's discussion on the one hand brings into focus the intrinsic worth of verbal language, while on the other hand it underscores a unique status of poetry and a special role poetry plays in *mysterium verborum* as it spans the gap between nature and the metaphysical. In this light an act of poetic creativity may be viewed in terms of the building of a bridge which in the likeness of the Incarnation inextricably connects the Divine with the human by enclosing transcendence in the body of words.

The sense of the inscrutable bond between God's Word and human words permeates the poetry and critical prose of Elizabeth Jennings (1926–2001), an important English poet of the twentieth century who gained a great acclaim from her readers. In the words of Michael Schmidt, a poet himself and at the same time

her friend and editor of much of her poetry, Jennings "was the most unconditionally loved writer of a generation that included Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis (contemporaries of hers at Oxford), Thom Gunn and Donald Davie" (Schmidt 2002: xix). Emma Mason, the later editor of Jennings' currently most comprehensive volume of *Collected Poems*, spoke in the same vein when she called her in the "Preface" and the extended "Afterword" of her book "one of the most discerning and lyrical Christian poets" (Mason 2012a: xlii), and "one of the most significant Christian poets to emerge from post-war Britain" (Mason 2012b: 961). The unmistakeably religious and Christian profile of Jennings' poetry is also emphasised by Barry Sloan who speaks of her as "a pre-eminent example of a writer whose Christian faith and denominational allegiance to Catholicism are repeatedly explored in her poetry over almost fifty years" (Sloan 2006: 393).

At the beginning of her poetic career, in the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, Jennings was loosely connected with the informal group of Oxford-based poets known as the Movement, who highly esteemed her poetic art and technical skill. Many years after the Movement had already dispersed, Amis recalled Jennings in his *Memoirs* and referred to her as "the star of the show, our discovery" (qtd. by Buxton 2009: 293). Apart from already mentioned Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Thom Gunn and Donald Davie, the group also included such literary figures as Robert Conquest, John Holloway, D.J. Enright or John Wain. It was John Wain who much later, when the phase of the Movement was over, paid tribute to Jennings' artistic accomplishment with a laudatory poetic letter entitled "Green Fingers to Elizabeth Jennings in Oxford", referring to the force of Jennings' creative impulse prevailing over the poet's life turbulences and her nervous collapses, which he calls a "world of colour blossoming in the dark!" (Wain 1969: 54). Remarkably, in the opening lines of his letter Wain makes a distinct allusion to Jennings' religious faith underlying all her writing when he speaks about: "A pavement of logic strung on the cables of faith. / Belief in the known fire and the unknown fire. / A programme for eternity rooted in time" (Wain 1969: 51).

Jennings' ties with the Movement, however, were neither strong nor permanent, and she quickly distanced herself from the group, claiming later in one of her interviews that she did not fit there being a woman and a Catholic among men and atheists (see Orr 1966: 92). With the exception of personal friendships Jennings did not find any deeper artistic and thematic affinity with the members of the Movement, and so she followed her own poetic path, marked with evocative titles of her twenty-six consecutive volumes of published poetry, where the reader can trace her profoundly religious "way of looking", as announced by the title she gave to the 1955 collection of poems which won her the prestigious Somerset Maugham literary reward. Consequently, the religious way of looking tinged her "sense of the world", as declared by the title of her subsequent collection, published three years later.

Along that path of her writing career Jennings' religious creed was continually overlapping her *ars poetica* and poetic practice. Hence the Christian Faith, specifi-

cally experienced within the formal frames of the Roman Catholic Church, was closely intertwined with her particular poetic expression. As a result Jennings' poetry does not only get involved in a dialogue with the supposed, or implied, reader who is engaged in the poetic act of sharing[1], but first and foremost it is positioned in the presence of God. Such positioning on the one hand defines the attitude characteristic of a prayer, which in the wording of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* means "being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him (CCC: IV 2565) or else "the raising of one's mind and heart to God" (CCC: IV 2559). On the other hand, the placing of the poet in relation to God calls attention to the metaphysical reality underlying both nature and human existence. The incomprehensible interlocking of the human with the Divine in the making of poems is most succinctly voiced in one of Jennings' late poems, significantly entitled "A Metaphysical Point About Poetry" (*Praises*):

> (…) I wish to say that God
> Is present in all poetry that's made
> With form and purpose. (…) (775)[2]

The lyrical note and feminine tenderness prevailing in Jennings' poetry do not diminish the force of that poetic proclamation which becomes at the same time the profession of the poet's belief that a poem at its deepest layers is ultimately anchored in God, for the words of poetry are always derivatives of and pointers to Logos. It is also the reason why Jennings' poetry often meditates on *mysterium verborum* which can be distinguished as one of the crucial themes of her writing.

This strange interweaving of God in the fabric of poetry can be better understood in the light of Jennings' perception of the profound link between the making of poems and the nature of mystical experience, mostly elaborated in her prose work *Every Changing Shape*. In that book Jennings discusses in the context of mysticism a variety of figures, primarily poets, writers and visionaries such as, for example, Julian of Norwich, St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, George Herbert, Thomas Traherne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Charles Péguy, Simone Weil, Georges Bernanos, T.S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens. As can be seen the list comprises not only dedicated Christians, but also atheists, or agnostics, and the chapter devoted to Wallace Stevens is tellingly entitled "Vision without Belief". In the "Foreword" to *Every Changing Shape* Jennings accentuates the close similarity between poetry writing and the practice of prayer, and then she goes on to define her own standpoint regarding the subject matter of her study: "This is a study of

[1] "Sharing" is one of the key concepts used by Jennings in her discussion of poetry, for she believes that the crucial raison d'être of a poem is that it provides a special space in which the poet shares his vision with the reader; "we need to share" from Jennings' poem "A Sense of Place" (*A Way of Looking*) recurs as a leitmotif in all her work. Jennings therefore recognises the essential necessity of the presence of a sharer to give meaning to experience.

[2] For all quotations from Jennings' poems page numbers refer to Emma Mason's edition of *The Collected Poems*. The title of the respective book of poetry is given in the parentheses.

poetic and mystical experience by a practising poet who is also a Catholic" (Jennings 1961: 10). In this way Jennings introduces herself not only as the author of one particular book, but in the compressed form she defines her personal identity in terms of poetry and Catholicism, the two essential categories which distinctly resound in her entire creative output. Yet, while reading and discussing Jennings' poetry immersed in her religion, one ought to be aware of an important reservation which the poet makes herself trying to prevent turning poetry into an exposition of a religious doctrine. In one of her introductions to a book of religious verse Jennings makes it clear that religious poetry neither seeks to teach nor intends to convert. Accordingly, she forcefully asserts: "Poetry, whatever its theme, offers experience, not sermons" (Jennings 1981: 10).

Much of Jennings' poetry is tantamount to her spiritual autobiography. Through the relationship of sharing, crucial in Jennings' *ars poetica*, the reader is invited to enter into an intimate spiritual space of the poet's professed religion which in a more or less overt way permeates the corpus of her work. It is not surprising that a great number of Jennings' poems can be read as an innermost personal record of the poet's experience of Faith perceived primarily in terms of being responsive to and conscious of the Divine Logos operating in the world. Particular poems register not only Jennings' friendships, breakdowns and elations, places she visited, paintings she admired and music she listened to, but they also mark meaningful landmarks along her spiritual itinerary. That is why the body of her poetry provides an interesting parallel to the account of her life given in the only biography of Jennings published so far, written by Dana Greene on the basis of a thorough archival research and interviews with Jennings' contemporaries.

In any discussion of religious poetry there is a tendency to describe this poetic subcategory as poetry addressing religious issues or dealing with a wide range of religious subjects. However, this formula does not seem quite adequate when applied to the entire corpus of Jennings' poetry. Alongside her strictly religious poems, with easily identifiable religious subject-matter, such as the Incarnation, Passion, the Virgin Mary, or saints and mystics, there are also numerous poems which do not treat about religious subjects directly. Instead, and perhaps more importantly, their religious character lies in the fact that they create an imaginative space which is put forward as a place of meeting with God. In Jennings' poetic credo truly religious poetry does not require an explicit articulation of a religious theme. It suffices when poetic discourse and imagery are imbued with subtle inklings of God's Presence, or when "a few lines hold a hint of Heaven" (733), as it is expressed in "Hermits and Poets" (*In the Meantime*). In a similar way the deep-seated sense of the Divine embedded in her poetry is articulated in the poem with a somewhat surprising title in this context, "An Age of Doubt" (*Times and Seasons*), in which Jennings speaks of "my poems / Whose rhythms sometimes moved to the tide of creation / And felt the touch of a God" (656). A great number of Jennings' poems bear testimony to how in the often arduous process of writing poetry, involving struggles with onsets of dryness, the poet firmly and inevitably stands in

the presence of God. In "Whitsun" (*Timely Issues*), the poem published in the year of Jennings' death, the Christian feast of Pentecost blends with the restoration of poetic power, and so the poet speaks of her elation caused by the regained creative impulse:

> (…) Happiness
>
> Is how I write and know God is near,
> Tongues of fire bear poetry to its height,
> While holy rhythms take my words to where
> There never is a night. (820)

In Jennings' poetic idiom the absence of the night or, conversely, the presence of light, are always indicative of the realm of God, like "a hint of Heaven" from "Hermits and Poets".

It should be noted that in Jennings' poetry the holy encounters with the Divine are occasioned not only by religious celebrations, but for the most part they are prompted either by the poet's encounters with works of art, painting or music, or by the contemplation of nature. That is why her acts of poetic imagination embodied in a poem merge with a common Catholic prayer known as "Act of Faith". It is not accidental therefore that a poem in which she confesses her need of such *locus sanctus* of the metaphysical encounter bears the title "Act of the Imagination" (*In the Meantime*):

> (…) Yes, I always need
>
> Herbert's sonnet 'Prayer' say, or that great
> Giotto painting for
> My heart to leap to God. I want to meet
> Him in my poems, God as metaphor
> And rising up. (…) (734).

Meeting "God as metaphor", i.e. concealed in the rhetorical figures and strategies deployed in the poetic space, leads the poet to a far more important encounter with God as the Real Presence, "rising up", i.e. God Incarnate, Crucified and Risen from the Dead. In "Michelangelo's First Pietà" (*Consequently I Rejoice*) the poet inspired by the best-known sculpture of the Florentine master sees in it "God in the grip of our humanity" (391). Similarly, pondering on the art of Paul Klee in the poem with a dedicatory title, "For Paul Klee" (*In the Meantime*) the poet realises that the painter's brush "can be potent even over sun / And, like a prayer, can reach beyond, beyond" (735).

Music on account of its absolute dissociation from any material basis and its purest insubstantiality which are suggestive of the spiritual, has an especially privileged position in the imagination of the poet and believer as a sacred space of the encounter with God. Hence next to Jennings' numerous poems concerning painters, sculptors and their art in general, there are also many poems which propose a meditation on music and its potential to bespeak God's presence and

communicate Logos. Music which is usually evoked in Jennings' poetry is neither played on man-made instruments nor available for a musical notation on sheet music. Very often it is framed in light and associated with sunlight, moonlight or starlight, all of which are clear pointers to the Divine. In "The Early Work" (*Tributes*), listening to music is analogous to making poetry, as both, according to Jennings' theological poetics, reach out towards transcendence. So the poet expresses her overwhelming desire: "O let / My poems find, / As stars do light, / The music of mind" (588). The plea of the artist corresponds with the supplication of the believer who yearns for a profound communion with God in prelapsarian bliss, as in the closing lines of "The First Music" (*Familiar Spirits*):

> (…) O how much I would give
> To hear that first and pristine music and know
> That it changed the turning planet and visited stars. (687)

One of the concepts frequently recurring in various Jennings' poems on the theme of music is the ancient idea of the 'music of the spheres', otherwise known as 'harmony of the spheres' or '*musica universalis*'. The 'music of the spheres' is essentially a metaphysical concept which hints at the transcendental order of reality and takes the form of music inaudible to the physical ear, but attainable through a different mode of hearing when it is approached through the pathway of poetry. Jennings identifies listening to the music of the spheres with entering into a deep communion with the Divine principle of being. That is why in the poem entitled "'Music of the Spheres'"[3] (*Familiar Spirits*) she calls it "Heaven-sent / Sound" and "a grace that's lent" (707). The music of the spheres belongs to a different order of reality as is made clear in the poem "A Happy Death" (*Tributes*), dedicated to the memory of Jennings' friend, a Dominican priest, who in the poet's vision

> Is out in the elements, one with the music of spheres
> Which God plays over and over in artists' minds
> For the great ones to copy out in little fragments,
> Angel messages putting this frightened world
> At peace with itself. (…) (619)

The music of the spheres is usually linked with a sense of serenity and beauty that can be felt and observed in nature. That is why the world of nature significantly figures in Jennings' poetry as a singular *locus sanctus* to establish a relationship with God. In "A Full Moon" (*Praises*) the poet asserts: "Nature was fashioned for this purpose. See / A moon reminds us of God's ministry" (761). Jennings looks at the world not only with the sensual eyes of the poet sensitive to its beauty, but also with a spiritual insight of her Faith which makes her see metaphysical significations shining through and reflected in all the phenomena of nature. The contemplation

[3] It is noteworthy that the title of the poem is additionally taken in inverted commas, which underscores the fact that the phrase "music of the spheres" is not merely a poetic invention, but the poet draws upon a long tradition of ancient authorities and the heritage of western civilisation.

of nature does not only provide her with an inspiration, but is also conducive to prayer. "Rapture of Spring" (*Praises*) registers a poetic explosion at the linguistic level of semantics and syntax:

> Play havoc with our language. It is Spring.
> Let nouns be adjectives and every adjective
> Become an adverb. Let the language sing
> As daffodils blow trumpets (…) (758)

Notably, poetic euphoria is accompanied by the equally gleeful urgency to pray:

> We speak in joy at all this ripe display
> And point up to the sun with work to do.
> O see, it too can pray. (758)

The world as a marvel of creation full of the traces of God does not only open man up to the Divine, but in Jennings' poetic vision it becomes a universal wordless prayer in which human beings participate. In "Girl at Prayer" (*Timely Issues*) Jennings observes:

> (…) she need not search for words
> Or make any movements either.
> All she need do is copy the sun's behaviour
> Or the moon's silent entry at night. (813)

In "Sufism" (*Consequently I Rejoice*), though the poet refers directly to Islam, the poem is primarily concerned with mysticism as a phenomenon common to all great religions, Jennings speaks of God who is "a veil over the world but is also shining at us / Through all growth", and who "hides in the detailed veins of a leaf, in the dance / Of petals in wind" (392). This description perfectly corresponds with the vision deriving from Jennings' Faith that recognises the traces of the Divine in all the astounding beauty of nature. In the poem "An Education" (*Moments of Grace*) Jennings recollects "Being elevated into wonder / Unknown before" (441) when as a ten-year old girl on a walk in Oxford suburbs she was struck with the inexpressible gorgeousness of the starlit sky. Looking back at that incident she sees in it the first traces of her budding Faith and concludes, accordingly, that then she was "caught up in an education / Sublime and starry" (441) which stayed with her ever since and made her "a wanderer still among those stars" (441). Likewise, in a later poem "A Sky in Childhood" (*Extending the Territory*) Jennings recalls her memory of a sense of awe and wonder felt at the sight of the sky at night interspersed with innumerable twinkling stars which to a child looked like "diamonds on receding velvet" (505). To the little girl the starlit sky hinted at transcendence as something that lies beyond and is far more magnificent. In Jennings' creative output there are many similar poetic testimonies of the poet's early and later experience of the numinous which in theologically oriented discourse is linked with the Holy understood as "a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion [of which it constitutes] the real innermost core" (Otto 1936: 5–6). In

Jennings' poetic imagery manifestations of nature are presented as a tapestry that God has woven with his word and design. In consequence, the natural world pointing at the Divine continually nourishes and sustains the poet's Faith.

The title of one of Jennings' poems, "Cradle Catholic" (*Consequently I Rejoice*) accurately specifies her religious background. Unlike some other well-known English writers and poets who were converts to religion usually from positions of agnosticism (e.g. G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot) Jennings was brought up in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church which she never rejected, even in spite of various upheavals in her life. Roman Catholic Christianity turned out to be the best ground for the growth of her Faith, as can be seen in the long-lasting influence which her stay in Rome had upon her spiritual life and its repercussions in her poetry. Similarly to being a "cradle Catholic", also Rome, as a place of belonging, defines Jennings' identity. In "Happiness in Rome" (*Relationships*) the poet confesses: "I had come home at last, I had come home. / Home to my Faith" (298). Forty years after her first memorable stay in Rome Jennings still thought about that city as *terra sancta* of her Faith, and so in the sonnet "Rome I" (*In the Meantime*) she meditates:

> (…) Faith was all around
> In voice and face and works of art. No doubt
> Could last there long. All seemed like holy ground (748)

Some constituents of the Roman Catholic doctrine were particularly important not only for Jennings' life of Faith, but also for her poetic art. It concerns especially the mystery of the Incarnation, seen as the embodiment of the Divine in the human, together with its stupendous consequence in the Real Presence manifest in the Eucharist, their corollary in the existence of sacraments in the Church, and their operative force at the meeting point of the human with the Divine. Although Jennings' poetry is suffused with the physicality and sensuality of seeing, touching and hearing of the objects belonging to this world, it is, nonetheless, fuelled by the movement of the soul towards the supernatural. That is why the idea of the sacrament plays the central role in Jennings' poetics, for the poet finds in the tangible and visible materiality of paintings or sculptures, and in the indescribable beauty of music, or else in the magnificence of nature, a suggestive analogy to the sacramental dimension of her religion.

The recognition of that analogy is vital for Jennings' conception of the sacramental character of poetic words which, in her view, are endowed with a unique potential to bespeak transcendence. In consequence, a poem through its link with Logos has the capacity of participating in the mystery of the Divine embodied in the sacrament. Faith revealed in Jennings' poetry is closely connected with the poet's understanding and experience of the sacramental, which owes much to the work of David Jones, whose idea of art as "essentially a sign-making or 'sacramental' activity" (Jones 2008: 161) allowed many valuable insights regarding the sacramental perspective. Jennings refers to it in a poem "Visit to an Artist" (*Song for*

a Birth or a Death), dedicated "for David Jones", in which she pays tribute to her fellow Roman Catholic, a poet and painter:

> Then I remembered words that you had said
> Of art as gesture and as sacrament,
> A mountain under the calm form of paint
> Much like the Presence under wine and bread –
> Art with its largesse and its own restraint. (101)

The concurrent "largesse" and "restraint" relate to a work of art as well as to the Eucharistic Presence of Christ, in the form of bread and wine, which can be only recognised with the instrument of Faith. The similar sacramental perspective of Faith informing the poetic activity is adopted when in the poem "Questions to Other Artists" (*Consequently I Rejoice*) Jennings, aware of the poets' affinity with musicians and painters, asks about their shared experience after overcoming the creators' block:

> Aren't you grateful also
> For the truthful song,
> Or the colours fitting
> Space you left for long
> As I when words are offered
> Like a Host upon the tongue? (397)

The Host, grapes, harvest, or bread and wine, are recurrent metonymies representing sacraments and the sacramental in Jennings' poems. For example, in "Grapes" (*Growing Points*) the poet speaks of the grapes which "are the sign / Of harvest and of Sacrament" (311). Likewise, in "A Full Moon" (*Praises*) she feels elevated looking at the full moon and seeing in it

> (…) the Host held up
> For everybody's eyes
> To see and understand the high and deep
> Salvation in the skies. (760)

Thus the body of the poem becomes a carrier of a theological message which empowers Faith. If there is any borderline between poetry and prayer, it gets blurred in Jennings' poetry, for both alike are expressive of Faith.

Apart from emphasising the potency of words which due to their mystical link with Logos are given a special status in Jennings' poetic idiom, the poet also attaches a great importance to silence which occupies a privileged position in her literary output. On the one hand silence is the fountainhead of words, while on the other hand it affords the best ambiance for the growth of Faith as it assists in the cognition of the ineffable. In "The Fear" (*The Moments of Grace*), the opening poem of "Christmas Suite in Five Movements", the poet muses on the mystery of Nativity: "Philosophy breaks all its definitions, / Logic is lost, and here / The Word is silent" (450). Silence is presented as a perfect completion of words and an indispensable condition for finding out truth. In "Gift of Tongues" (*A Sense of the World*), the

other poem focused on Pentecost, the apostles who are "enlarged by language"(83) soon find out that it is silence which they need much more than their God-given eloquence:

> They said, 'We must find silence once again.
> Only a faithful silence can contain
> The mystery we watched.' (…) (83)

In "Making Silence" (*Relationships*) the poet, having distinguished different kinds of silence, concludes by referring to the supreme silence which is "a gift entirely unasked for / When God is felt deeply within you / With his infinite gracious peace" (288).

Jennings was not only writing poems which were meditations on the theme of silence, but she was also in various ways interweaving silence into the worded poetic space. Therefore no matter how paradoxical it sounds, Faith in her poetry is articulated to some extent by means of silence. There are some obvious ways of introducing silence into a poem by means of a skilful use of punctuation. Jennings, however, markedly broadens the gamut of stylistic instruments at her disposal. She is fond of repetitions which do not merely serve the purpose of emphasis, but by extending the length of the poetic line they generate an extra space for a silent contemplation. In a comparable manner her frequent use of the idiosyncratic exclamatory "O", which through its prolonged sound effect stretches the utterance, almost unnoticeably adds to it an additional layer meant for pausing. The same function of making more room for silence within the worded body of the poem is performed by the suffix *-est* in the superlative, as in the poem "Whitsun Sacrament" (*Growing Points*), which is concerned with the struggle between belief and doubt, and ends with the believer's submission to God's Word resonating in silence: "When we most need a tongue we only find / Christ at his silentest" (320).

In Jennings' poetry silence never represents a void; quite the opposite, it always leads to richness and fullness, and so in her poetic vision silence is invaluable in corroborating the life of Faith. That is why in "'Hours' and Words'" (*Praises*) Jennings states in the words echoing God's injunction from the Book of Genesis:

> Let there be silence that is full
> Of blossoming hints. When it is dark
> Men's minds can link and their words fill
> A saving boat that is God's ark. (777)

Thus on top of enunciating the value of silence, the opening line of this stanza also communicates, by the parallel with the biblical "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), the poet's conviction that poetic words are shadows and echoes of the Word as Divine Logos.

In her own poems as well as in her prose meditations on the art of poetry Jennings worked out her own theological poetics tuned into the metaphysical and for this reason highly effective in giving voice to the poet's religious sentiment and Faith.

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Abstract

Elizabeth Jennings: Voicing Religious Faith through Poetry

The article presents Elizabeth Jennings, one of the most important lyrical poets of the 20th century, and it concentrates on the religious profile of her poetry, with a particular emphasis laid on the Incarnation, Real Presence and sacramentality, featuring conspicuously in Roman Catholicism which was Jennings' major inspiration. In her poetic idiom Jennings underscores a mystical and ontological link between poetic words and Logos as the eternal Word of God, and she makes ample use of silence which becomes a poetic space especially suitable to contain the sense of the Divine. The discussion focuses on Jennings' poems addressing the issues of painting, music and the natural beauty of the world, for in her poetic vision they are specific territories of the human encounters with God. Jennings' literary output shows how the borderline between poetry as an artistic activity, and prayer seen in terms of talking to, or contemplating God, gets blurred. In her work the poetic space becomes the best milieu for the expression of the poet's experience of the Divine.